NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, 79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

No. 499 NEW YORK, JULY 21, 1906. Price, Five Cents

A CLUE FROM THE CLOUDS

OR NICK CARTER'S MYSTERIOUS EVIDENCE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

Chick arrived just in time to seize the descending arm of Vera, who would have buried a dagger in the heart of Nick Carter while in a fierce struggle with her ex-convict husband.

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A Clue from the Clouds;

OR,

Nick Carter's Mysterious Evidence.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS AND PUZZLING LETTER.

Nick Carter and his chief assistant, Chick, were standing side by side on the forward deck of the detective's yacht *Nadja* as the beautiful vessel approached that enormous steel structure which is known far and wide as the Williamsburg Bridge, which spans East River from Grand Street, in Manhattan, to Broadway, Brooklyn.

The yacht was headed south and was possibly three hundred yards from the bridge when the detective, happening to glance upward, saw something white flutter from the bridge.

He noticed it as it appeared in view, for it happened that his eyes were upon that exact spot at the time—and in that first glance it seemed to be nothing more than has already been described.

But it had not fallen ten feet before a current of air forced open its folds so that its original size was multiplied by four, and it instantly occurred to the detective that the article was in reality a letter which somebody had dropped from a car window, or had thrown away intentionally.

"Look, Chick," he said, calling the attention of his assistant to the falling letter, which was now sailing in a zigzag course, downward. "Somebody is sending us a message from the clouds," and he laughed softly.

"I should say that it was from the bridge," replied the assistant, looking upward and instantly perceiving it.

The detective laughed again.

"Oh, well," he said, "let us be romantic for once. So far as we are concerned it comes from the clouds, all right. The wind is carrying it along in our direction, too. I shouldn't wonder if it would fall directly upon the deck of the *Nadja*."

"It does look that way," assented Chick, watching it. "What do you make it out to be? A letter?"

"Without doubt. It is written on heavy paper, too. See how it holds its folds even though the pages have opened in its descent. It is almost like a tailless kite; eh?"

"So it is. I wonder what is written there, Nick?"

"Evidently you will soon have an answer to your question," replied the detective, "for it is bound our way. I think it will alight upon the decks, somewhere; or, at least, it will come very near to doing it."

"By Jove, Nick! I mean to have a try at securing that letter."

"Do so. It will at least be amusing—while it lasts."

The detective turned to the officer on the yacht's bridge, and pointing toward the fluttering letter, gave a hurried order that he keep the *Nadja* as nearly beneath the fluttering bit of paper, as possible.

Then he smilingly watched his assistant as the latter made his way slowly aft, walking backward with his eyes fixed upon the descending paper, which had now approached quite near to them; but some contrary current of air seemed to keep the "message from the clouds" from descending quite low enough for it to be reached.

Once it fluttered almost within reach of Chick's eager grasp, but it soared away again, and the detective laughed heartily when he saw his assistant shake his fist at it, and heard him exclaim:

"I'll have you now, by thunder, if I have to go overboard after you!"

And that is precisely what he did do, for of a sudden he shouted loudly to his chief:

"Pick me up, Nick!"

Then he wheeled and made a running leap into the air directly over the stern rail of the yacht, and Nick, watching him, saw him seize the letter in his right hand and clutch it tightly in his grasp just as he disappeared in the waters of the East River.

Of course the engines of the yacht were reversed; of course it was not long before Chick was hauled aboard; and, also, of course, he still held the letter in his possession.

He found that his master was still laughing over the episode, and that there was a general grin going the rounds of the crew, for most of the men supposed that "Mr. Chick" had fallen overboard.

"How about it now?" asked Nick Carter banteringly. "Will you admit now that your letter is a message from the clouds, or do you call it a communication from the deep? Eh?"

"I'll tell you presently, when I have dried the thing out so that we can read it," replied Chick, laughing with him, for he thought no more of that dip in the river than he would of one in his bath-tub, save that the latter would have been cleaner.

"You might take the opportunity to dry yourself a little at the same time," suggested the detective; to which bit of advice the assistant made no reply, for he had already dived below to change his garments.

The detective seated himself under the awning and having lighted a cigar, thought no more about the circumstance until sometime later when Chick reappeared.

"Well," he said, then, "have you read your letter yet?"

"No; I've tried to do so. It is at present undergoing a process of drying. After that we will read it together."

"Do you think it is quite proper to go to such lengths in order to read other people's letters?" asked the detective teasingly.

"Humph!" replied Chick. "Didn't you say yourself that it was a message to us from the clouds?"

"I must admit that I did," laughed Nick. "As soon as your letter is dry, we will read it. Am I to understand that you haven't even looked at it as yet, Chick?"

Chick shrugged his shoulders.

"I had crumpled it rather badly in my hand," he said, "and of course I was obliged to straighten it out in order to dry it." Here he paused, but after a moment he added rather seriously:

"I caught here and there a word of the letter, Nick, and I will confess that what little I did see interested me. It required some self-control on my part to refrain from an attempt to read it to the end on the spot."

"Why didn't you do so? There was no reason why you should not."

"Possibly not; but I felt that there was."

"What? After going overboard after the letter in the way you did?"

"Yes. Even so."

"What in the world did you see in the letter, anyhow?"

"Wait until we read it together."

The detective looked sharply at his assistant, and for the moment suspected that Chick was endeavoring to play a joke on him; but there was real seriousness in the assistant's face and he dismissed the thought.

"Let me know as soon as the letter is dry enough to be read," he said.

They had swung around the Battery by this time and were headed up the North River toward a pier where the detective expected to make a landing for a few hours; for the fact was that he was determined to escape from the heat of the city for a few days, and it was his intention to take a party of friends on a short sea voyage, for the air, and for the rest that such a trip would afford.

It was not until the yacht was securely moored to the pier that the letter was again referred to, and then Chick approached his chief and said:

"Will you come below and read that letter before you go ashore?"

The detective nodded and followed his assistant to the cabin.

With exceeding care the assistant spread the letter out upon the table in front of them; and then he asked:

"Will you read it for yourself, or shall I read it to you?"

"I think I will examine it for myself, Chick, since

you seem to place so much importance upon it," was the quiet reply. "It is a curious-looking document, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

"There seems to be no beginning, no ending, no capital letters, no commencing or ending of sentences; eh? In fact, it looks to me like nothing more or less than a mere jumble of words that have been thrown together at random."

And indeed the remark of the detective seemed exactly to describe the letter, so far as appearances went.

There was no date upon it. There was no superscription. There were no periods or punctuation points of any kind to be seen, and the words themselves conveyed no meaning at all.

The letter itself, if letter it might be called, was written upon note-paper of an extra fine quality, which the detective recognized at once as "imported;" and he knew that it must have been purchased at one of the large concerns in the city which deal in that sort of stationery.

The chirography was feminine and beautiful—if writing can ever be described by that adjective.

It was evident that there had been no effort to disguise the handwriting, either. The writer had evidently relied upon the apparent absence of sense in the document to spare her the fear of discovery.

The contents of the letter were as follows:

"Time arrived you fulfil part the entered between verona hawthorne you me and are hawthorne arrive 1030 will expected be hand have them the is although have your for you have with to-night murder the sister soon discovered will suspected course don't how you covered tracks that not me is own you receive to-night you the and know those must they see dead of elder and must elsie you be over them else serve will up my of contract you yours will your for year the of time will me divorce if should to up your in particular of three have to you to you if do to the will satisfied will the and will 250000 put your to with you at hour a declares i free you the you it must by show the to-night bring"

The two detectives read the letter at the same time, Nick with the document spread out before him upon the table and Chick leaning forward with one hand resting upon the table while he peered over the shoulder of his chief.

"Well," remarked Chick, after both had read the strange letter through to the end for the third time, "for lucidity and comprehensiveness I think that 'billy dux' takes the bakery, ovens, and all!"

"It certainly is rather a remarkable production," assented the detective. "I wish we had the other half of it."

"Eh?" exclaimed Chick.

"I wish we were in possession of the other half of this letter," repeated the detective.

"You wouldn't mind explaining just what you mean by that remark, would you?" asked Chick.

"I mean that the letter has been written in sections."

"Well, there isn't an extraordinary amount of sense to this particular section, whatever the other one may contain," remarked Chick. "Or, are there more than two sections to it?"

"In this particular case I think there are only two," replied Nick, "although I have known of cases where cables have been sent in three or even four sections; but I should say that this document has been divided into only two—and I think it is the second section that we have here, for the reason that it begins with a noun."

"You mean—just exactly what, Nick?" asked the assistant.

"I mean that in all probability we have here before us, the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, tenth, twelfth, and so forth words of the original letter, and that the first, third, fifth, seventh, ninth, eleventh, and other odd words were sent in a separate envelope. It seems, Chick, that this has proved to be a message from the clouds, after all."

"I wonder if the other half of the letter could be found, Nick? The thing strikes me as an extremely interesting affair," said Chick meditatively.

CHAPTER II.

THE MESSAGE FROM THE CLOUDS.

There was absolute silence between the two detectives after that for upward of half an hour, during which Nick Carter never once took his eyes from the strange letter.

Then he pushed it aside, and looking across the table toward his assistant, who had taken a seat at the opposite side of the cabin, he said:

"I can get a little sense out of it, but not much, Chick."

"I confess," replied Chick moodily, "that I can make nothing of it at all, save that somebody's sister is to be murdered to-night, and that we ought to prevent it, if possible."

The detective shook his head.

"You are wrong there, I think," he said. "It reads to me as if somebody's sister had already been murdered."

"How so?"

"That phrase, 'murder the sister soon discovered,' seems to be the only really connected one in the document; and that happens to be so only by accident."

"Go on. What do you mean?"

"This: If we attempt to supply the missing words between the words we have before us, we would say that it should read: '*The* murder *of* the *other* sister *will* soon *be* discovered.'"

They were again bending over the letter with their heads together.

"What do you make of that word 'to-night' just before the word 'murder'?" asked Chick.

"I think that it concludes a preceding sentence," replied Nick.

"Humph! Well, perhaps that is so. Suppose we begin at the beginning and see what we can make of the whole affair; eh? What do you say?"

"Very well."

"You said you think this must be the second half of the letter, so to speak?"

"Yes; that is my opinion."

"Then we should begin the letter with the article 'the'; eh?"

"Now, where would you suppose the first sentence of the letter should end, Nick? I confess that it is utterly beyond me."

"I should suppose that the first sentence would end with the word 'me.' I think I can already read the letter lucidly that far."

"Oh! Do you? What is it?"

"This: I will put the words that I supply, in italics, so to speak; or, better, I will write down the whole sentences and underscore the words that I supply."

"Well?"

For a moment the detective wrote rapidly with his pencil, and then showed the result to his assistant.

It was as follows:

"*The* time *has* arrived *for* you *to* fulfil *your* part *of* the *contract* entered *into* between X verona X Hawthorne X you *and* me."

"What do the X's mean?" asked Chick.

"They mean that I cannot even guess at what those words may be, for the reason that in all probability they are proper names."

"Might not Verona Hawthorne be one name?"

"No, because another word must come between Verona and Hawthorne—that is, in order to carry out my idea of the letter."

"I see."

"Now you keep silent a moment, Chick, and I will rewrite the entire letter as far as I believe I am able to decipher it."

"I wish to goodness you would!"

"Where the letter appears utterly incomprehensible to me for the present, I will make a succession of dots. Understand?"

"Yes."

The detective wrote steadily for a considerable time after that; and then he produced the following:

"*The* time *has* arrived *for* you *to* fulfil *your* part *of* the *contract* entered *into* between X verona X Hawthorne X you *and* me . . . . . Hawthorne *will* arrive at ten-thirty *to-night*. *You* will *be* expected *to* be *on* hand . . . . . *The* murder *of* the *other* sister *will* soon *be* discovered. X will *be* suspected. *Of* course X don't *know* how *well* you *have* covered *your* tracks . . . . . They *must* see *the* dead *body* of *the* elder *sister*, and *it* must *be* Elsie . . . . . I will *keep* up *to* my *part* of the contract *if* you *keep* yours . . . . . and *you* will *receive* two hundred and fifty thousand *dollars* put *into* your *hands* to *do* with *as* you *please* at *the* hour X a *court* declares *that* i *am* free *from* you . . . . ."

"There, Chick," said the detective. "I believe that is as far as I can go at present."

Chick studied the written words a long time and with exceeding care.

Then he said:

"As far as it goes, it seems to be clear enough, always supposing that you are right."

"Yes."

"Where you have written 'the other sister' in the first place, you have in the second instance written 'the elder sister.'"

"Yes. The 'other' sister is evidently an 'elder' sister."

"It is evident, too, that she has already been murdered."

"Yes; I think so."

"And that the deed was done by the person to whom this letter was addressed; eh?"

"That would seem to be evident."

"You seem to think that the name of the murdered girl is Elsie, Nick."

"Yes; at least, for the present."

"M-mmm! If there was an elder sister, there must have been a younger one as well, and if we refer back to about the middle of this letter, there is one part of a sentence there, which you have skipped, that I think I can read."

"What is it, Chick?"

"I see that you haven't really skipped it, only I read it differently, Nick."

"Very good. Tell me how you read it."

"It is this sentence. I read it like this: 'They must see the dead body of the elder sister and *you* must *have* elsie *with* you.' I take it that Elsie is the younger sister, and that she is somehow mixed up in this affair."

"It would not surprise me if you were correct about that, Chick," said the detective musingly.

"What do you make of that mention of a divorce, Nick?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Well, I do."

"All right. Go ahead. What is it?"

"It is rather preposterous, but it is an idea."

"Let's hear it."

"In your elucidation of the letter you have here a sentence which reads, 'I will keep up to my part of the contract if you keep yours,' and then you make a skip."

"Yes."

"Well, go right on, and say: '*And* will *be* your *wife* for *a* year. *At* the *end* of *that* time *you* will *give* me *a* divorce.' I admit that it is an utterly preposterous supposition, but all the same that is the way I read it."

"I don't know why we need call it preposterous," commented the detective. "A person who would enter into a conspiracy of murder, such as this letter seems to indicate,

might not be above contracting to marry a man and remain his wife for a year on the condition that he would give her an absolute divorce at the end of that time. I regard it as a very likely suggestion, after all."

"Thank you, Nick."

"Especially so because the woman who wrote this letter is evidently 'in society.' She is doubtless a woman of refinement—outwardly, at least. She is certainly a woman of education. The marriage part of the contract may be one of their methods of avoiding suspicion."

"By Jove, Nick! I think that is the whole idea."

"The only real difference between your version and mine is that I regarded the marriage as already consummated."

"Yes. And his nobs, the murderer, is to get two hundred and fifty thousand plunks the moment that she is free from him."

"Exactly."

"What do you think about it all, anyhow, Nick?"

"I think that we had best forget it. It is all so blind that we can do nothing at all in connection with it and there is no use of worrying ourselves further about it."

"The murder has been done, anyhow. At least, we could not prevent that now."

"No; come; let's go ashore."

"I wish I had the other half of that letter."

"So do I."

"I think, Nick, if you don't mind, I will remain home from this cruise and do a little cruising on my own account, to see what I can unearth in connection with this letter."

"But I *do* mind. You are going on this cruise with me, so that ends that. We will return in three days."

"All right. You are not going to sail till evening; eh?"

"No."

"And I can do what I please until that time, I suppose?"

"Certainly, Chick. You don't have to ask me that."

"I know; but you were so mighty short about letting me remain behind that——"

"Drop that, Chick! I am determined that you shall go because you need the rest and the recreation as much as I do. I will give you two weeks all to yourself, in which to work upon this case after our return, if you want it."

"*Done!* That will suit me to a tee."

And right here, "gentle reader," as the old-fashioned novelist would say, the chapter would end if this did not happen to be a true story—if it were pure fiction. But as it happens to be true in practically every detail, and as truth is always stranger than fiction, there remains yet another incident to be related in connection with it which is quite as remarkable as the first one, already told.

When the two detectives reached the shore after leaving the yacht's cabin, they found the big Peerless car awaiting them, for Nick had given orders that it should be there; and they were soon being carried as rapidly as the law would allow, toward the detective's home.

It was exactly three o'clock in the afternoon when the automobile was stopped at the door.

Inside the house, Patsy and Ten-Ichi were awaiting them; and they had been at home only a few moments when Joseph came into the library, where they were seated, and announced to the detective that an officer from the central office was in the reception-room and wished to see him at once, if possible.

It was one of the detective-sergeants from headquarters who was there, and as Nick entered the room he rose and presented a long, sealed envelope to the detective.

"The commissioner sent me up here post-haste with this, Mr. Carter," he said. "He said he thought it might interest you, but that he could not make head or tail of it at all."

"What is it?" asked Nick, placing the envelope, unopened, on the table beside where he was standing. "If it is anything to detain me in the city, I don't want it, for I have a party——"

"The commissioner knows about your intention of going away this evening, Mr. Carter. I do not think it is anything that will detain you. It is really only a strange letter of some kind that came to headquarters in rather a remarkable manner."

"Eh?" demanded the detective, interested at once. "How? In what manner?"

"It was blown from the Williamsburg Bridge, sir, straight into one of the boats of the river and harbor squad. The commissioner thought you might find it interesting."

But the detective was not listening, for he already held in his hand an article which he at once recognized as the "other half" of his so-called "message from the clouds."

CHAPTER III.

THE FULL CONTENTS OF THE LETTER.

"Tell me all you know about this," said the detective, replacing the letter with the one written by the commissioner in the envelope.

"That is about all I know about it, Mr. Carter. It was blown from the bridge into——"

"When? At what time?"

"I think it was about noon—possibly a little before that."

"Humph!" grunted the detective.

"I was told that your yacht, the *Nadja*, had passed under the bridge, bound south, not five minutes before that time, sir. Possibly you can fix the time from that fact," said the sergeant.

"Yes; I think I can. Thank you."

"Is that all that you require of me, Mr. Carter?"

"Tell me before you go, how this letter happened to get into the hands of the commissioner so soon?"

"The sergeant who caught the letter as it fell, happened to be on his way to headquarters at the time. He had been ordered to report to the commissioner. When he read the letter he discovered in its contents some reference to killing and to corpses. I have not read the letter myself, so I do not know just what it was that he saw that attracted him. But, anyhow, he put the letter in his pocket and took it to the commissioner."

"Well, what else?"

"The commissioner, when he read it through, thought that possibly it referred to a contemplated crime—'a crime in prospective' he called it—and he ordered me to bring it to you, together with a letter of his own which he enclosed with it."

"Yes."

"And at the same time he ordered Sergeant Knapp and me to say nothing whatever about it."

"What about the men—two, were there not?—who were with Sergeant Knapp at the time?"

"They have received the same order, sir."

"Very good. Thank you again. Tell the commissioner I am very much obliged to him, and that I will give it my immediate attention."

"Yes, sir."

"And that also I will report to him if I think there is anything in it. You may add that I had not yet looked at the letter while you were here, but that I will not neglect it, and will reply to his own letter very soon."

The detective-sergeant took his leave then, but after he was gone the detective sat for a long time alone in the reception-room, gazing rather blankly at the second—or, rather, the *first*—half of the strange and remarkable letter.

Taken by itself it was scarcely less incomprehensible than that other document over which he and Chick had puzzled their brains for more than two hours in the cabin of the yacht.

The letter was written upon paper exactly like the other. It was in the same handwriting, and in every particular, save that of the words themselves, was the same.

Here it is exactly as the detective read it:

"the has when must your of agreement into praxatel and and and praxatel verona here will to-night you be to on i told that work done i only word that must proofs you the of elder must be you be of i know well have your but does interest that your lookout will 100000 if have proofs you what proofs be must the body the sister you bring with to delivered to nothing will i live to part the if fulfil i be wife one at end that you give a absolute you fail live to agreement this each our associates sworn kill or have killed you keep it world be nobody be wiser you have cash into hands do as will the when court that am from for rest know and abide it us corpse and elsie"

He returned it to his pocket with a smile, and murmured:

"We will soon know how near, or how far, Chick and I were right in our guesswork down at the yacht."

Then he produced the letter of the commissioner, and read:

"Sergeant Knapp, of the river and harbor police, received this remarkable document in his boat while he was passing beneath the Williamsburg Bridge about noon to-day. It suggests that some sort of a crime is contemplated or has been committed by the writer and the person to whom it was addressed. I have neither the time nor the patience to attempt to unravel its mysteries, but it strikes me as something especially in your line. I therefore suggest that you take it with you on the short cruise you are contemplating. It may serve as a diversion if you find that your company bores you. Let me know what you think about it when you return."

That was all, but it was very much to the point.

The detective returned to the library then, and at once he said to Chick:

"You have that letter from the clouds in your pocket, haven't you?"

"Yes? Why?"

"I have found the other half of it."

"*Whaaaat?*"

"Sure thing, Chick."

"Where in the world did you get it?"

"It came to me about as mysteriously as the other one—and from the same place, too."

"From the clouds?"

"From the Williamsburg Bridge."

"Do you mean that the other half of our letter blew into somebody else's boat and that that somebody else has brought it to you?"

"Just that. It blew into Sergeant Knapp's boat."

"When? Before or after we had passed."

"Just afterward. He took it to the commissioner and the commissioner sent it to me. It seems very strange—almost unbelievable, in fact—but when you stop to think it over, it all happened just as naturally and just as logically as a duck takes to water."

"I don't see——"

"Knapp was on his way to the commissioner at the time. He took the letter there. The commissioner read it, and found in it the words kill and killed and some others which made him think that it had to do with some sort of a crime. He didn't wish to bother with it, and so he sent it to me. There you are."

"Let me see it, will you?"

"Wait a moment and I will. Produce your half of the letter. We will read together."

"Well, I am ready."

"This is the first half that I have here, Chick, because it begins with the word 'the,' so I will begin. I will read a word, then you read one, and we will continue in that manner to the end."

And the entire letter, as they read it aloud together,

and as they afterward reduced it to writing in order that it might be studied to better advantage, was as follows:

"The time has arrived when you must fulfil your part of the agreement entered into between Praxatel, Verona and Hawthorne, and you and me. Praxatel and Verona are here. Hawthorne will arrive to-night, ten-thirty. You will be expected to be on hand, and I have told them that the work is done, although I have only your word for that. You must have proofs with you to-night. The murder of the elder sister must soon be discovered. You will be suspected, of course. I don't know how well you have covered your tracks, but that does not interest me. That is your own lookout. You will receive 100,000 (dollars) to-night if you have the proofs, and you know what those proofs must be. They must see the dead body of the elder sister, and you must bring Elsie with you to be delivered over to them. Nothing else will serve. I will live up to my part of the contract if you fulfil yours. I will be your wife for one year. At the end of that time you will give me a divorce absolute. If you should fail to live up to your agreement in this particular, each of our three associates have sworn to kill you, or to have you killed. If you do keep it, the world will be satisfied, nobody will be the wiser, and you will have two hundred and fifty thousand cash put into your hands to do with as you will, at the hour when a court declares that I am free from you. For the rest, you know it and must abide by it. Show us the corpse to-night, and bring Elsie."

It was gratifying to both the detectives to realize how closely they had arrived at the real meaning of the half of the letter they had to work upon, and if the reader will turn back to their elucidation of it he will also be astonished.

But they lost little time in self-congratulations.

There, before them, was the letter which told so vaguely of a terrible plot so wide and so deep that it was appalling.

Here was murder in the air. Murder that had already been done, or that was to be done between the present hour—four o'clock in the afternoon—and ten o'clock that night.

Here was a plot within a plot, somehow.

Here was a letter written by a woman, evidently in society, to judge from her reference to the "world"—by a woman who calmly made a terrible bargain whereby she consented to become the wife of a murderer for a year, in order to shield him and herself from the consequences of their crimes.

Here was a case in which even the church, and a sacrament of the church, were to be made innocent accessories to their crimes.

It was awful! It was hideous!

The detective and his three assistants, who were seated with him in the library, remained silent for a long time after the reading of the letter, and it was Nick Carter himself who finally broke it.

He did it by pressing the button which called Joseph to the room.

"Joseph," he said, "I want you to go to the *Nadja* and install yourself there at once. As my guests arrive, you will say to each of them that affairs have arisen which render it imperative that I and my assistants should remain in the city for the present; that I have directed you to render my apologies; that you are to go with them, and serve them exactly as if I were present; that the captain already has his orders respecting the cruise and that all they have to do is to go aboard and forget that I am not with them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"We cannot leave here, Joseph. I reply upon you to make my friends comfortable."

"I will do my best, sir."

"I know you will. That is all."

As soon as the valet had left the room, Nick picked up the receiver of the telephone and was soon in communication with headquarters and the commissioner.

"I have received that letter you sent to me, commissioner," he said.

"Yes," was the reply. "What do you make of it?"

"Something very hideous, indeed. It happened that I already had in my possession the key to the problem."

"You are a remarkable chap, Carter."

"Thank you. I thought I would tell you at once that I am going to devote my entire energies and the skill of my three assistants to this matter now."

"What about your cruise?"

"I have given it up—for the present."

"Do you think the case is sufficiently important for that?"

"I do, sir."

"Very well. Will you let me know about it as soon as you have the opportunity?"

"I will."

"I suppose there is murder in the air, isn't there, eh?"

"It is worse than murder, sir."

"Eh? Worse than—humph! Well, all right. Do as you think best—only keep me posted."

"I sincerely hope that I will not be a long time in discovering something to tell you," replied the detective; and he hung up the receiver.

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER'S LOGIC.

The detective turned then to his three assistants.

"My lads," he said, "there is an aspect of this case which appeals to me as no other one within my recollection has done.

"At the moment when Chick and I saw one of the halves of that remarkable document floating in the air toward us from the bridge over our heads, I jokingly remarked that we were about to receive a message from the clouds.

"As the bit of paper came nearer to us, we both be-

came interested in it, and the result was that Chick finally went overboard in order to secure it.

"It seems to me now that it was indeed a message from the clouds—almost from heaven itself—to call upon us to do our utmost to prevent the commission of a great crime.

"At least, I have accepted it in that spirit. Fate intended that the letter should fall into my hands, and when the remaining half of the letter came to me after a manner almost as strange as the other, I no longer had any doubts about the matter.

"I want each of you to understand that from this moment our lives are dedicated to the unveiling of the mysteries connected with that letter.

"We read from it that five people are concerned in a conspiracy of some sort which comprehends the murder of one young woman, the abduction of another, and probably the theft of a fortune which now belongs to them.

"It contemplates, also, the fulfilment of a contract between a man and a woman which is about as wicked as anything could be.

"Somewhere in this city, at half-past ten o'clock tonight, those five persons are to meet together. Four of them are to listen while the fifth—the man to whom that letter was sent—describes the details of his crime in all its hideousness.

"It is now almost five o'clock, so we have approximately five hours and a half in which to discover where that meeting is to take place, and who the persons are who will attend it.

"We have nothing to work upon save the 'clue from the clouds,' but I think if we consider carefully, we will find that there is considerable substance there.

"I will give you the benefit of my own opinions first, and after that we will devote one half an hour to a general discussion. Then I will send each of you out in one direction or another, and we will each do our utmost to prevent the consummation of this hideous affair.

"It is my impression that the five people concerned in the crime are persons of social prominence, and I think we will have to search for them among the ranks of so-called 'good society.'

"I gather that idea from several indications.

"The character of the paper upon which the letters were written is one of them, and I regret that there is not time or opportunity to visit the few great firms in the city who might have imported it.

"But even that might avail nothing, for the paper might have been brought from abroad by the writer of the letters.

"The handwriting in the letters is another indication, for it belongs to the style which is at present generally adopted in fashionable circles.

"The character of the handwriting is another indication, for it bespeaks a person of refinement, or at least of refined environments. The method of expression is an indication of education, and I have not a doubt that the writer of that letter is a beautiful woman.

"I think that we should consider her as a beautiful woman, for the very reason of the revolting contract she has entered into with the man to whom the letter was sent. It is evident to me that he is passionately in love with her, and that she despises him—and that he has made it a condition of the fulfilment of the crime, that she should become his wife; and this condition has been compromised upon the terms we read here, horrible as they are.

"It would seem that in the names of Praxatel, Verona, and Hawthorne, we should have a clue, for it appears that the woman has not sought to disguise her handwriting, and therefore why should she make use of false names?

"Still, I am inclined to the opinion that they are false names; or, if not that, then that they are merely given names—middle names, if you please—that are rarely used, and hence would not be recognized readily.

"We know that there are two sisters who are to be made the victims of their plots, and we fear that one of them has already been sacrificed; we may logically decide that Elsie is the correct name of the younger of these sisters.

"It might be argued that there being no date to the letters, they might have been written yesterday, or several days ago, and that therefore the meeting at ten-thirty at night may already have taken place.

"I will admit that it is a possibility, but I do not think it is a probability—and for this reason:

"Letters of this sort would be destroyed by the recipient as soon as read, and naturally would be read as soon as received. I believe that the man had only just received and read his letters and was in the act of destroying them when they were whisked from his hands by the wind or as the result of some accident, and were brought to us so remarkably.

"We must conclude also that somewhere among the conspirators there is a lot of money.

"The recipient of the letters is to receive a hundred thousand dollars to-night, and at the end of a year he is to get two hundred and fifty thousand more.

"From whom? From the woman who wrote the letters? I do not think so, although it is quite possible that it is she who intends to pay the latter mentioned sum.

"From Praxatel? From Verona? From Hawthorne? I should say from Praxatel.

"Why from Praxatel? I will tell you.

"To every conspiracy there is a head, and if one conspirator mentions the others, the name of the most consequential one will invariably be mentioned first.

"We must assume then that Praxatel is the head and the brains of this affair, whoever he may be, and we must also assume that all of the parties to this affair have means to a considerable amount, first because we have

decided that they are members of society circles, and, second, because the large sums are mentioned as mere incidents in the matter. The woman who wrote those letters is accustomed to speaking of money in six or seven figures, you may be sure.

"Verona may be the name of another woman, and I regard it as quite likely. If so, we will probably find in the end that she is called Vera by her intimates; and it will be well to bear that suggestion in mind as a possible aid in our researches.

"We must assume, also, that the borough of Brooklyn is either the home of one or more of the conspirators, or that business of some sort had taken or was taking the murderer there at the time he lost the letters, for he was bound to or from that city at the time he lost them.

"I am inclined to think, however, that none of them lives there. I believe that the man had merely gone there to receive one of the expected letters, and was returning to New York at the time they were lost.

"I think this, because if he had received the letters at his home, he would have read them and also have destroyed them before he came upon the street.

"The very fact that he lost them proves to my satisfaction that he was reading them at the time, and therefore I believe that he crossed the bridge to receive one of them, not through the post, but from the hand of some person who was to meet him.

"Not both of them at the same time, mind you. One must have gone to him in another manner, and he was obliged to go to another place to secure the balance of the letter; and hence we have a part of the explanation of how he lost them.

"In his eagerness to read, he could not wait; he was doubtless on an open car; the drafts on the bridge are apt to be sudden and strong; they were whisked from his hands or knocked from his grasp; one of them fell through the bridge at once; the other lodged somewhere for a few moments, and was then blown away again to fall into the police-boat commanded by Sergeant Knapp.

"I think that about sums up my ideas in regard to this matter. I will tell you now what I wish you to do.

"Patsy will remain here, with the telephone at his elbow, until he has orders from me to leave it.

"Chick will go at once to Brooklyn, place himself in communication with the deputy commissioner there, and if possible will induce that official to accompany him on a round to the leading clubs of that city. At each of the clubs and wheresoever else it may seem expedient to him to do so, he will make careful and guarded inquiries concerning those four names we have at hand—Praxatel; Verona, or Vera; Hawthorne, as a middle name; and Elsie—an Elsie who has an elder sister.

"These instructions seem very vague, Chick, but they are the best I can give you, and we must do our work with the tools we have ready at hand.

"You will also take with you one of the letters as a specimen of handwriting. It might prove available, although I do not look for that result.

"Ten-Ichi will accompany me, and I will give him his orders later.

"Whenever it is possible, and as often as it may be reasonable, we will communicate with Patsy here at the telephone. In that manner we will keep in constant touch with one another."

"Now, are there any suggestions from any of you?"

"I have an idea," said Patsy at once.

"Good! What is it?" asked the detective.

"People in the position in life which we assume these persons to occupy, would be apt to own automobiles, wouldn't they?"

"Most likely."

"Well, automobiles are all registered, and have numbers."

"Certainly."

"I think that if Ten-Ichi or somebody were to go to the office of registration of the motor-cars, and were to engage two or three or more to assist in the work of going over the lists, it would not take long to accomplish it, and that more than likely the names might be found there.

"Of course, I understand that Hawthorne is a common enough name, and that Verona is not uncommon as a surname, and all that. But Praxatel is not a common name, and if it should be found in conjunction with either of the others——"

"It is a capital suggestion, Patsy. Ten-Ichi, you hear?"

"Yes."

"Have you any suggestions to make?"

"Not at present, chief."

"Then take Patsy's suggestion as incorporating your orders—and go at once. Chick, have you any suggestions?"

"Not at present."

"Then go ahead under the general direction I have given you, using your own judgment always, of course."

"I'll start at once."

"Just one more word before we part," said Nick, raising a hand to stop them. "If either of you obtain any information, follow it. Don't bother about the telephone unless you have time and opportunity. Act alone if necessary, each on his own responsibility. That is all."

"Will you do me a very great favor, chief?" asked Patsy, the moment they were alone.

"If it is possible, and reasonable, I will," replied Nick, smiling.

"Let me telephone for Mike Finnigan to come here and sit at the phone, and as soon as he gets here let me go out on my own hook, and on my own responsibility. *Please!*"

'You have something on your mind, Patsy."

"To tell you the truth, I have; but I don't want to tell what it is just now, for it seems absurd. Will you give me permission to do as I ask?"

"Yes, Patsy. Go ahead if you like."

Two minutes later the detective was in the street.

CHAPTER V.

THE ONE MAN IN ALL NEW YORK.

There is one man in New York City, who, without being in society himself, is nevertheless on speaking terms with more members of the "smart set" than any other one person in the metropolis. He is—or rather was, for he has been deservedly promoted to a position of great responsibility and honor—the head waiter at that great hostelry, the Waldorf-Astoria. We will call him Philip here, although Philip is not his name.

Philip possessed the dual talent of never forgetting a face or a name, and Nick Carter was thoroughly well aware of this fact.

Now, it is a fact that just as surely as the faces of all true believers in the Prophet are turned toward Mecca when they pray, so does every member of the "smart set" at one time or another during the season gravitate to the Waldorf.

The detective's comment made in strict confidence to himself was to the effect that if there lived one person in all the city of New York who was likely to be able to aid him in the identification of the writer of the letters, or of the names mentioned in those letters, that person was Philip.

Therefore, when he parted with Ten-Ichi at the bottom of the steps, he turned at once toward the famous hotel—and fortunately he was not long in finding Philip.

"Philip," he said, as soon as they met, "are you busy just now?"

"Not particularly, Mr. Carter. There is always plenty for me to see to, however."

"I don't doubt it; but can you spare me a few moments?"

"Certainly."

"And will you take me to your private sanctum for a little confab?"

"With pleasure. Come along, Mr. Carter."

Seated behind closed doors, the detective said to him:

"Philip, I want you to aid me in the identification of some people I wish to find. Will you do it?"

Philip pursed his lips and thought deeply for a moment. Then he replied:

"Mr. Carter, my position here is something in the nature of a confidential one. I might almost say that any knowledge I might possess in reference to any of the patrons of this place is in the nature of a confidential communication. I believe that is what the lawyers would call it, is it not?"

"Precisely."

"If I can aid you without trespassing upon my sense of obligation to——"

"Let me interrupt you, Philip."

"Yes, sir."

"I quite understand your feelings on this point and also the motives which prompt those feelings, and I honor you for them. It is for that reason that I approached this subject as I did."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter."

"I might possibly have trapped you into giving me the information I wish, for I know that you have confidence in me."

"I certainly have, Mr. Carter."

"Let me ask you a question."

"Yes?"

"If you knew that a great crime was to be perpetrated to-night—that one young lady was to be murdered and another one abducted, and that there were other crimes behind those that were even deeper and blacker than they are, you would not hesitate, would you, to use whatever knowledge you possess to prevent those crimes?"

"Most certainly not."

"No matter whom it might touch, or who might be concerned?"

"Not even if it should concern the man I honor above all others—my employer."

"Well said. That is exactly what I supposed."

"Will you tell me all about it, Mr. Carter?" asked Philip gravely. "You place a very great responsibility upon me, and I would like to know exactly where I stand before making a leap in the dark."

"I will promise you faithfully, Philip, that I will not act upon any information you may give to me during this interview without first making you fully aware of my reasons for seeking it, and neither will I act without your permission—after you have replied to my questions."

"Under those circumstances, Mr. Carter, you may command me," was the quiet reply.

"I thought so."

"And those questions are——"

"Wait. I do not wish you to be biased at all by what I have already said."

"I will not be, sir, after the promise you have made to me."

"Very good."

The detective drew from his pocket the half of the letter he had retained after giving Chick the other half, and passed it quietly to Philip.

"You need not take the trouble to read the letter, Philip," he said, "for it would tell you nothing. What I wish to know in regard to that is: Can you identify the handwriting?"

He watched Philip narrowly when he gave the letter

into his hands, and he fancied that he detected a slight start of surprise, although it was indicated only by a sudden contraction of the muscles of the jaw and a certain indefinite, almost invisible, widening of the eyes.

Beyond that, Philip's face was as expressionless as a Sphinx.

But he examined the writing attentively, or appeared to do so, and after a moment he passed the letter back to the detective.

"Well?" he said.

"Can you identify the handwriting, Philip?"

"I will say, Mr. Carter," he replied slowly, "that the writing has a look of familiarity to me. At present I would prefer to go no farther than that."

"And in reference to the paper upon which the words are written. Do you remember to have seen writing-paper exactly like that at any time before this?"

"I will make the same answer to that question that I did to the other—for the present," was the reply.

"Do you happen to know any person whose name—or one of whose names—is Praxatel?"

"I know *of* such a person; yes."

"Man or woman?"

"Both; a man *and* a woman."

"Ah! Are they related, do you know?"

"I have reason to suppose them to be man and wife."

"Humph!" said Nick to himself; and then to Philip:

"I had supposed the name of Praxatel to be a first name or a middle name; not a surname."

Philip made no comment to this, and the detective continued:

"Do you happen to have an acquaintance named Verona—man or woman?"

Philip was silent for a moment, his face still as expressionless as a mask. Then he said:

"I know of several people who bear that name, Mr. Carter. I suppose your question has reference only to a person by that name who is presumably associated with the persons of the other name you have inquired about—Praxatel. Am I right?"

"Yes; or with the writer of that letter I just showed to you," was the quiet reply.

"You are very shrewd, Mr. Carter," said Philip, smiling.

"It is one of the requisites of my profession, Philip," replied the detective; "but my promise holds good. Don't forget that."

"I have not forgotten it."

"And now will you answer the question?"

"I will reply to it as I did to the other one. I know *of* such a person."

"And is not that person a woman?"

"Yes."

"And the name a given name?"

"I believe so. It is not the surname, certainly."

"Why won't you assist me a little, Philip, instead of forcing me to worm all this information out of you by questions?"

"Because I am not yet sure of my ground, sir. Because I do not yet understand in just what manner I am rendering assistance—and because, afterward, my conscience will be clearer if I can remember that I volunteered no information whatever, but only replied truthfully to questions that you asked me."

"Good! You are right. It is better so."

"I think so."

"There is still another person associated with those already mentioned, who bears somehow, first or last or in the middle, the name of Hawthorne. Do you know *of* such a one?"

"I do."

"Man or woman"

"Woman."

"What?"

"To the best of my information and belief, Mr. Carter; and I may truthfully add that my information on the point is not extensive."

"I will give you this letter again, Philip, and I will ask you to read it through from beginning to end," said the detective; and he handed the letter to Philip again.

The detective could barely refrain from laughing outright at the funny expression which came into Philip's face when he sought to read the letter, for as the reader knows, there was no sense to it at all, as it stood.

Twice he looked up, but each time the detective motioned to him to continue, and after a little he said:

"Well, Mr. Carter, I have read it, but I cannot say that I am the wiser for doing so."

"Possibly not. But, Philip, there is another half to that letter, and they dovetail together so that they make very comprehensive reading. Chick has the other half, but I have here a translation of the complete letter."

"May I see it?"

"Yes. Here it is. Read it through to the end, if you please."

Philip complied, his face again like a mask.

When he had finished, the detective said to him:

"If you will compare that letter with the translation, you will find that the letter contains the first, third, fifth, seventh, ninth, eleventh words of the translation, and so on to the end, Philip."

"Yes; I see that."

"Do you understand now why I am eager for all the information you can give me?"

"Perfectly."

"Have you any idea at all concerning the identity of the sisters to whom that letter refers?"

"I think I have, Mr. Carter, and that is what is puzzling me most, just at present."

"Indeed! How is that?"

"Because if I am correct in my surmises, the writer of this letter is the one who is referred to *in* the letter as 'the elder sister.'"

"Humph! That's odd!"

"That is what I was thinking."

"You do know, then, who Elsie is?"

"I do; as sweet a young lady as ever lived, and the heiress to a large fortune."

"I guessed that much; but has she not more than one sister?"

"No; only one."

"You know where they live?"

"I know all about them, Mr. Carter—but I must confess that I cannot see through this plot at all. It seems to me that it must be a hoax of some kind. It—— You will have to let me think for awhile, until I see if I can get things straight in my mind about it. You see, it isn't at all likely that the 'elder sister' would order her own execution."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE PRAXATELS.

"Perhaps," suggested Nick, "if you will tell me all you know, I can assist you to see through it."

Philip was still silent for a considerable time, and the detective thought it prudent to await his pleasure; but after awhile he urged again:

"I wish you would let me help you out of your dilemma, Philip."

For reply, Philip made the following statement:

"To the best of my belief, Mr. Carter, the writer of this terrible letter, if I am to judge from the handwriting and the paper upon which it is written, is, or was, Miss Madelaine Congdon, although I wish to state right here that nothing short of absolute proof could lead me to believe that she would engage in any such plot as this letter indicates and outlines.

"She is a young woman of twenty-five or thereabouts, and her sister Elsie cannot be more than eighteen.

"They have lived abroad with their parents for a great many years; Elsie was born there, in Paris, where the father was a dealer in art collections, by which he gained a great fortune.

"Two years, or three years ago, they lost their mother, and their father brought them back to this country immediately after that. He lived only a few months after their arrival, so the two have been orphans about two years. So much for that part of it, for the present.

"The persons to whom we have referred as the Praxatels are really named Praxatel-Varney, it being a hyphenated name, only that since their arrival in this country only a short time ago they have dropped the Praxatel part of it and call themselves Monsieur and Madame Varney. Monsieur's given name is Herman, and madame's name is Verona—or Vera. That much I know positively; not from information obtained since they have been in this country, but because of a peculiar circumstance under which I happened to come in contact with them when I was in Paris a year ago. I am quite willing to believe almost anything of either of them because of that same circumstance."

"Very good, Philip. We will stick to the name of Praxatel for the present. We can introduce the Varney part of it when the proper time comes."

"Yes. The Praxatels—that is, Madame Praxatel—is a cousin to the Congdons. At all events, there is some blood relation between them, and there is a Miss Hawthorne Praxatel with them, who also calls herself Varney, who is also a cousin, farther removed.

"So much for the family history.

"Miss Madelaine Congdon, after the death of her father, engaged a chaperon to live in the home with her and her sister, and they have been frequent guests at the hotel, with other company. They were all here together only a few nights ago, save that the chaperon who has been with them heretofore was not present.

"It was then that I recognized the Varneys, or rather the Praxatels, and in that recognition recalled the circumstance that happened in Paris to which I have alluded.

"I do not know whether they would have recognized me or not, if they had seen me; but they did not see me. I took good care, for reasons of my own that they should not do so; but I also made inquiries at once about them, and thus discovered the fact of their relationship to the Congdons."

Philip ceased abruptly in his speech, and rising crossed to his desk, from which he presently returned with a letter in his hand.

"This morning I received this letter," he said, giving it into the hand of the detective. "It speaks for itself. You may read it."

Nick took the letter, and started with surprise, for it was written in the same hand and upon the same character of paper as the two documents that had puzzled him so sorely.

It was brief and to the point, and was, in fact, merely one of the usual requests made to Philip by the thousand, that he reserve a table in a specified location at a specified time for a specified number of plates, and giving him carte blanche concerning the menu.

But what surprised the detective most was, that this letter called for a supper for four persons to be served at twelve o'clock that very night—one hour and a half after the time set for the meeting in the letter in Nick's possession.

The letter was signed "Madelaine Congdon," and Philip

told the detective that a twenty-dollar bill had been enclosed as a tip.

"May I keep this letter?" asked the detective.

"Certainly—but with the understanding that you will make no use of it save under the utmost necessity."

"That is understood. You say you received it this morning?"

"Yes."

"Through the post? The envelope is not here."

"No; by messenger."

"And you have made preparations for the party?"

"I have ordered that the table be reserved. There is no need for further preparation than that."

"I see. Had you ever seen Miss Congdon's handwriting before you received this letter?"

"No; not to my knowledge."

"Has she never sent such a request to you before?"

"Once only, and then it was written by the chaperon I have mentioned."

"Who has evidently been deposed in favor of the Praxatels, eh?"

"So it would seem."

"Philip, have you any idea to whom this letter in my possession could have been addressed? Have you even a faint notion?"

"Not one."

"You do not even know that this letter sent to you is in the writing of Miss Congdon, except that her name is signed to it?"

"I do not."

The detective had no need to ask the address of Miss Congdon, for it was plainly written at the top of the page—an address which for obvious reasons need not be repeated here.

It was however, located in the ultrafashionable quarter of the city, and was only a few doors removed from Fifth Avenue.

There was a continued silence for some time after that, for both men were thinking deeply.

Again the detective had recourse to the mysterious letter, the translation of which he had taken there with him, and he read it through again carefully to the end.

"Philip," he said, then, "do you happen to know if these sisters have another cousin, or a relative—it should be a man who has paid particular attention to Madelaine Congdon, and who has in fact sought to marry her?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Carter, I know no more about the matter or about the family than I have already told you; and I only know that because I make it my business to know something about everybody who seeks my personal service in this hotel. It is a part of my business to know them. To know who they are; what their environment is; what their means are, and to call them by name when I see them. It is the secret of my success in the position I hold, for it enables me not only to enjoy a certain degree of familiarity with my guests, but it also places me in a position where I can be frequently of service to them."

"I understand you."

"Miss Congdon has dined here many times. She has given supper-parties here, but always, except on one occasion, they have been impromptu affairs."

"Yes."

"She is well known among the society people. Whenever she has been here, she has been as nearly the center of attraction as one young woman could be in this place."

"She is beautiful, then?"

"She is remarkably beautiful—or, rather, attractive. I don't know that an artist would select her as a type of beauty of any particular sort, but she has a charm of her own which is undeniably superlative. If the dining-room were filled now, and you should pass through it with the idea of selecting the most charming among the female guests, I have not a doubt that she would be your selection if she were there."

"What do you know about the fortune inherited from her father? Has she control of it, or is it——"

"I know nothing about it more than this. She has already assumed full control of her share, while the balance is still in the hands of the executors to be administered for the sister who is not yet of age."

"How large is the fortune? The whole fortune, I mean."

"I haven't an idea save that it mounts into the millions. Two or three, doubtless. It may be much more than that."

"Let us return now to the Praxatels."

"Yes."

"What was that incident to which you referred as having happened in Paris?"

It was evident that Philip had now determined to tell all he knew without reserve, for he replied without hesitation:

"Monsieur Herman and Madame Vera Praxatel conducted a gambling-house there."

"Ah! Indeed!"

"It is true that they did not call it by that name. It was operated under the guise of a salon; but all the same my friend who took me there, did so that we might play, and once we were inside the house and had passed through the required introductions, we were speedily admitted behind the veil, as one might say."

"And there you say you found a regularly instituted gambling-house?"

"Yes."

"It was there that you met the Praxatels?"

"Yes."

"Under that name?"

"Yes."

"Did you learn at that time that they were also called Varney?"

"No."

"Or that they were related to the Congdons?"

"No."

"It was not until they appeared here that you learned that much, eh?"

"It was not until after I had seen them with Miss Congdon that I made inquiries and discovered what I have already told you."

"And this Miss Hawthorne Varney—what do you know about her?"

"She received with the Praxatels the evening when my friend took me to the gambling-house."

"Humph!" murmured the detective. "This letter states, 'Praxatel and Verona are here. Hawthorne will arrive to-night, ten-thirty.' Now, what particularly puzzles me at the present moment, is why is that statement made in that manner if the party is already together? Does it suggest anything to you, Philip?"

"I do not know that the party is already together. When I made the inquiries I told you about concerning the Praxatels, my informant told me that there was also a Miss Hawthorne Praxatel. I understood that she was with them, possibly because I had seen her with them in Paris; but it occurs to me now that he did not say that she was with them. She may not yet have arrived."

"She was not with them when you saw them here at the house?"

"No."

The detective left his chair and crossed the room to the door.

"I cannot express my appreciation of what you have done for me to-night, Philip," he said. "But I must not take up your time any longer. I will see you again, or send you word before daylight, of whatever happens. For the present, I hope that when the party of four arrives for the supper—if they should come here at all—you will receive them and treat them as if nothing had happened."

"I shall certainly do that."

Then the detective opened the door and passed out of the room.

CHAPTER VII.

THE IMPOSTOR.

During the time the detective was closeted with Philip, there had been repeated calls for the latter at the door, and each one with the message that a gentleman wished to see him as soon as possible on important business.

To each of these calls, Philip had sent the reply that he would see the gentleman as soon as he should be at liberty.

Now, when Nick Carter opened the door and stepped into the corridor, he found himself face to face with Patsy.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "So *you* are the gentleman who wished to see Philip on important business, eh?"

Patsy grinned at his chief, and replied:

"You only got ahead of me because you started first. Anyhow, I had the same idea that you did."

"Well, you may come along with me now. I shall need you. I am glad that you are here," said the detective, and they left the hotel together.

"Where are we going?" asked Patsy, with the freedom of a privileged person, as soon as they were seated together in the tonneau of the automobile, for he had not heard the order which Nick gave to the chauffeur.

"Home, first, for about five minutes while I get into a dress suit," was the reply.

"Me, too?" asked Patsy, with a delightful disregard of grammar.

"No. You will remain where you are until I come out."

"And then where do we go?"

"We are going to make rather an early call upon a young society woman—or, rather, I am; you are not."

"I'd have been doing the calling if you had not gotten ahead of me."

"Possibly."

"It would only be fair to take me with you now, chief."

"I am going to do that, lad, but you can be more useful to me outside the house than in it just now."

"Who is the young woman?"

"A certain Miss Congdon. Here we are at the house. Stand where you are till I return."

The detective leaped out and dashed into the house, but a very few minutes later he came out again, arrayed in his dress suit, and with a bundle under his arm which he pitched into the tonneau before him.

"I may want those togs, and I may not," he said. "I'll take them along, anyhow."

He gave the required address to the chauffeur, and they sped away toward the upper part of Fifth Avenue; and then Nick said:

"You had heard nothing from Chick or Ten Ichi at the time you left the house, I suppose?"

"Not a word," was the reply.

"Finnigan has heard nothing, either. I left word with him to tell them where to come if either should telephone in. Be silent, now, Patsy. I want to do a little thinking."

And so in silence the journey to the given address was traversed; and there, according to Nick Carter's directions, the motor-car drew up directly before the door of the mansion at which the detective intended to call.

The detective had determined upon a bold move if he

should be fortunate enough to find Miss Madelaine Congdon or her sister at home; and upon a bolder one if he discovered that neither of them was there.

It was fifteen minutes past eight when he arrived at the door of the mansion—two hours and a quarter to the time set for the meeting.

Of course, he understood perfectly well that if the letter from the clouds meant anything at all it meant that Madelaine Congdon was already dead, and, therefore, he could not hope to find her at her home.

But he did hope that the conspirators had not yet taken Elsie away—and so, when he gave his card into the butler's hand, he said:

"Miss Congdon, or Miss Elsie Congdon—or both."

The card was one of exquisite workmanship, there was a crest in one corner of it, and it bore the name of "Sir Philip Griswold, R. A."

All of this had its due effect upon the stolid butler, for he softened visibly when he read the name—without appearing to do so, of course—and at once conducted Nick to the reception-parlor.

"I will ascertain if the ladies are at home," he said; and disappeared.

Here was a poser for the detective, to begin with.

It was evident from the butler's manner that both the young ladies *were in the house* at that moment, or at least, that the butler supposed them to be there, and if that were true, it must be that the letter was, after all, in the nature of a hoax, or at least, the meditated murder had not yet been committed.

He was interrupted in his meditations by the return of the butler, who stood stiffly in the doorway, and announced in an expressionless voice:

"Miss Congdon is at home, sir, but she requested me to say to you that she does not remember having met you before. If she is mistaken, or if you will state what the errand is upon which you call, she will be happy to receive you, sir."

"Say to Miss Congdon," replied Nick, "that I have never had the honor of meeting her, but that I hope she will consent to receive me, if only for a moment."

The butler bent his body at the hips, and withdrew.

There was a wait of a few minutes after that, and then the detective heard the rustle of silken skirts along the hall, and presently a vision of loveliness which even the words of Philip had not led him to expect, appeared in the doorway.

He rose instantly to his feet and bowed to her while she approached very daintily and gingerly.

"I must apologize for this intrusion," said the detective. "The fact is I had ventured to hope that my name was not unknown to you, although we have never met."

"You are Sir Philip Griswold, the artist," she murmured, taking the bait at a bound. "Of course, your card tells me that much, and I will admit that your name is not known to me. If you will tell me in what way I can——"

She paused as if leaving him to complete the sentence.

"I have come, Miss Congdon," he said, "to crave as a great boon from you, the honor of painting your portrait."

She was on the point of interrupting him, but he prevented it.

"Please permit me to finish what I have to say," he said. "I am not an artist who seeks a commission, but an artist who is pursuing a passion. I have been told that my talents are not small, and I have the honor to ask you again if you will permit me to——"

This time she did interrupt him, and with some hauteur.

"I fear that it is quite out of the question, Sir Philip. Even if I were quite willing to have you paint my portrait, it would be otherwise impossible at the present time."

"Indeed?" replied Nick, with evident disappointment in his voice.

"My time during the next three weeks will be entirely taken up, and at the expiration of that period, I am going abroad for an entire year."

"Indeed!" said the detective again; and was silent.

"So, you see," she continued, "it would be quite impossible, even if other things were—that is, even if I were quite sure that I were willing to have it done."

It was evident to the detective that for some reason she was not only willing, but would be glad, to have her portrait painted, and that she regretted—also for some hidden reason—that conditions rendered it impossible. Nick felt that the idea appealed to her, but that the reason for that appeal was not the usual one—vanity.

There was some deeper motive in the idea; some deeper design. So he said:

"Pardon me for seeming insistent, Miss Congdon, but I might, during the three weeks you mention, obtain a few sittings from you. I might begin my work and then, you know, I might follow you abroad and continue it whenever the opportunity should offer. I have come all the way here to obtain your consent, and surely, I would not hesitate to travel many times as far to make it a certainty."

"You have only just arrived?" she asked; and Nick replied, quite truthfully:

"I have only just arrived, Miss Congdon;" but he referred to his arrival at the house.

"And am I to understand that you came here purposely to ask this favor of me?"

"You are to understand exactly that, Miss Congdon," was the calm reply.

Again she seemed to meditate. Then, with averted eyes, she remarked, in a low tone:

"The fact is, Sir Philip, I would personally be quite willing to accede to your request, but there are reasons why—I fear that I must tell you a secret. I may rely upon your discretion, sir?"

"Entirely—believe me," he replied, bowing again.

"I am about to be married," she said slowly, looking him straight in the eyes now. "The cards will be issued within a week."

"Ah!" remarked the detective. "I understand."

And he did understand—better than she suspected.

Upon the instant the letter of "the clue from the clouds" came into his mind, and he recalled the words:

"I will live up to my part of the contract if you fulfil yours. I will be your wife for one year."

Instantly the detective believed that he saw through the whole dreadful plot.

It came to him in a flash of inspiration, and he believed that he saw seated in his presence, *not* the Madelaine Congdon whom Philip had described, *not* the "elder sister," referred to in the letter, *but the real writer of those letters; an impostor; a substitute for the heiress—the woman who had plotted the murder of one sister and the abduction of the other.*

Until that instant he had not dreamed that the woman before him was other than she pretended to be, but now he was positive in his own mind that he was *not* in the presence of Madelaine Congdon.

He understood, too, why she had sent down that tentative message by the butler, putting out a feeler to know if the supposed Sir Philip Griswold had ever met the real Madelaine.

He understood, too, why she regarded it as desirable that her portrait should be painted by the celebrated but eccentric artist—for there was a Sir Philip Griswold who was rich, eccentric, and a talented artist who refused pay for his services. He happened to be a friend of the detective's, and Nick had taken liberties with one of his cards.

If the portrait were painted, it would render her all the more secure in her usurpation. It would clench the nails in the coffin of the real Madelaine.

And, then, the detective had a second inspiration.

"If I might venture——" he began, and stopped.

"Yes?" she inquired. His tone had been suggestive, and her curiosity was aroused.

"I was on the point of saying," continued the detective, "that if I had the honor of knowing the name of the gentleman you are to marry, I might seek him out, and prefer my request to him. If you would tell me who he is, or where he is stopping, or—may I venture to hope that he is here, now? Here, in your house, and that I may see him?"

She laughed. It was a little, rippling laugh, but nevertheless, it was not pleasant to hear, and there was a glitter in her big, round eyes which belied it, too. And she replied:

"No. He is not here now. I doubt if you could find him to-night, even at the clubs he frequents. But I think you may call here at this hour the day after to-morrow, if you will be so good. I will have seen him in the meantime."

"And will have secured the consent from him, for me?" asked Nick, with seeming eagerness.

"Possibly," she assented.

"Won't you tell me his name?" Nick asked the question with pointed directness.

For an instant only she seemed to hesitate; and then, as if deciding in her own mind that there could not possibly be danger in the admission, she replied:

"Certainly. He is Mr. Carroll Burbank—my cousin."

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW METHOD OF SHADOWING.

Carroll Burbank!

It seemed to Nick Carter at that instant as if he could have shouted the name aloud over the housetops in his delight at knowing it.

Carroll Burbank!

Who, in all the city was there who had not at some time heard that name?

It was a synonym for everything that was roystering, everything that was sporty, everything that was bad which might be in a measure cloaked and glossed over by the magic influence of social connection.

Big, handsome, conscienceless Carroll Burbank!

A man with the best of connections throughout the city! A man who had gone through three fortunes! A man who was often before the police courts for a barroom row, for deliberately knocking down some defenseless individual, but who invariable got off with a fine, and paid it—or had it paid for him by some one of his associates or social connections.

And so it was Carroll Burbank who had been on the car on the Williamsburg Bridge, and had lost the fatal letter overboard.

Notwithstanding the excitement that Nick felt because of the admission made by the woman, he showed no trace of it in his face or in his manner.

Instead, he was entirely deferential as he responded with a half-sigh:

"Ah! Your cousin. Happy man!"

She laughed again, rather shortly, and with something of hardness in the tone, and then she rose to indicate that the interview must be brought to a close.

Nick rose also, and then she remarked, half apologetically:

"If you will call at half-past eight, the day after to-morrow——"

"I will not forget it," replied the detective.

"I will endeavor to have Mr. Burbank here to meet you at that time. I would not permit you to hurry away now, Sir Philip, were it not for the fact that I have an engagement, and——"

"How very thoughtless of me!" exclaimed the detective. "I was entirely forgetful of the demands upon your time. May I venture one more remark before I take my leave?"

"Certainly."

"I have also been told of the beauty of your sister—Miss Elsie Congdon. I speak with the freedom of an artist, you perceive. May I express the hope that she is quite well?"

"Quite so, thank you."

"I had wished to pay my respects to her, also, but——"

"She is away from home at present, Sir Philip. She is yachting with a party of friends."

There was no more to be said after that, and Nick took his leave at once.

But as he passed into the street he was well satisfied with what he had accomplished, although he would have given much to have known whether Monsieur and Madame Praxatel-Varney were under that particular roof at that particular moment.

"Patsy," he exclaimed, as soon as he was inside the tonneau of his machine and had given his order to the chauffeur, "have you got the necessary things about you for a quick and a thorough change?"

"Sure."

"I will drop you at the next corner. I want you to keep your eyes upon that house."

"I can do that all right."

"It is certain that the meeting at ten-thirty is not to be held there, and it is also certain that I have not the remotest idea where it is to be held. Stop here, Bob. Get down, Patsy. If anybody comes out of that house, follow, but I think I will get back before any of them will leave."

"All right."

"If somebody should come out, do your very best shadowing to-night."

"I'll do that."

"As soon as you know anything, telephone to Finnegan, at the house, and if you have time to give any information before you start away, write it on the back of an envelope and wad it into a ball; then drop it in the gutter as near to the house as possible. If you are not here when I return, I will look for such a message."

The machine sped away then, leaving Patsy, already busy with his "change," standing upon the curb.

Nick had himself taken as speedily as possible to the garage of the Peerless Company in Forty-first Street, and while Manager Wridgway was getting out a different colored machine for him, and giving directions to another chauffeur, the detective made an entire alteration in his own appearance.

That is, he got himself out of the dress suit as rapidly as possible, and donned the one he had brought with him in the bundle.

After that he merely added an iron-gray wig to his costume, and fastened on a silvery, false mustache.

"Will that do, Charlie?" he asked, when the manager came to tell him that all was in readiness.

"Capitally, Nick. What's doing to-night?" was the reply.

"I don't know yet. That is what I am going now to discover. I'll send this machine back and recover my own as soon as I am through with it."

Patsy was gone when Nick returned to the vicinity of the home of the Congdons, having left the automobile around the second corner, out of sight, but where he could secure it at a moment's notice.

The detective walked along slowly, searching the gutter with his eyes, and presently, not far from the house, he discovered the wadded bit of paper for which he was searching.

Having secured it, he continued on his way past the house and turned the next corner, where, with the aid of a lighted match he managed to read what Patsy had written.

"Man and woman. Toward 59th."

That was evidently all that Patsy had had time to write, but the detective knew that the faithful fellow would telephone the moment he had anything to report, and that he himself had only to call up Finnegan at any time in order to discover what that message might be.

Then he tore the brief note into bits and threw it away, turning as he did so to retrace his steps along the way he had come.

He had just passed the house when he heard the droning of an approaching automobile, and the next instant a huge machine dashed up to the door of the Congdon mansion and stopped.

Nick lost no time then in getting to his own motor, and he so managed that he came out into the avenue from the side street at the very instant when the other machine, containing the woman who had represented herself to be Madelaine Congdon, passed there.

He turned down the avenue directly behind the other car, for by no possibility could the occupants of it suppose that a car which had just appeared from a side street and was moving rapidly, was following them.

There were only two occupants at that—the chauffeur and the woman.

She occupied the tonneau alone.

"Foxy," thought Nick. "She has sent the Praxatels afoot, and by a street-car or a hired cab, while she goes

to the place of meeting in her motor. Whatever happens, she does not propose to be caught."

A moment later he murmured:

"I wonder where the other woman is? I wonder where Miss Hawthorne Praxatel-Varney can be? Ah! I remember now. The letter said, 'Hawthorne will arrive 10.30.' What time is it now, I wonder?"

He looked at his watch and discovered that the time was exactly nine. Then he leaned forward and spoke to the chauffeur.

"You might run ahead of that machine, if you get the opportunity where there are other vehicles on the street. You will probably find such a chance. I want you to get directly in their way, if possible, in order entirely to disabuse their minds of any idea that we are following them."

"All right, sir."

"Wait until there are other vehicles around you, then get in their way and hold them back a little, if you can."

They sped straight down the avenue past the Plaza, past Forty-second Street, past the Waldorf, and as they were crossing Thirty-third Street the opportunity to carry out Nick's order occurred.

The chauffeur succeeded in getting in front of the other car, and then in getting directly in its way, as the detective had directed, and so, for nearly a city block they impeded its progress, but always without the appearance of doing it wilfully.

Then, a block or so farther down they loosened up a little and ran on ahead, and thus managed to arrive at Twenty-third Street ahead of it.

Here, again, Nick bade his chauffeur to slow down, and he managed so that the other car overtook them exactly at the turning.

He could not possibly have calculated better, for it really appeared as if the detective's car began the turn of the corner first.

In reality, however, Nick was watching narrowly which course the other machine would take, and it was not until he was entirely satisfied that they intended to turn to the westward through Twenty-third Street, that he bade his driver do the same.

And still he managed to keep ahead, using a small mirror in the palm of his hand, with which to observe the movements of the other car.

It was shadowing after a new rule—keeping in front of the party shadowed; but the exigencies of the case seemed to make it imperative, for the detective did not wish that shrewd woman, whom he had so lately interviewed, to become suspicious that she was pursued.

At Sixth Avenue an up-town street-car got in their way and both machines were obliged to wait until it passed; but it gave Nick the opportunity to observe that it was their intention to keep along the street and not to turn into the avenue.

Again he sped along, sometimes abreast of the other car, sometimes ahead of it, sometimes dragging along a little in the rear.

All the while, without in the least appearing to do so, he kept a narrow watch upon the woman and upon her chauffeur.

But neither of them appeared to have noticed Nick's car at all.

The woman seemed utterly oblivious to all her surroundings.

She looked neither to the right nor to the left, and the chauffeur was too much occupied in the handling of his machine to be observant.

"If she had not told me about that intended marriage, and mentioned that she intended to be abroad a year, she would have fooled me," mused the detective, as he watched her. "There is always a weak spot in the strongest armor, and that happened to be hers.

"If Philip's estimate of the character of Madelaine Congdon is at all correct, *she* would never have consented to wed with such an all-round scoundrel as Carroll Burbank.

"But this woman, who happens to resemble Madelaine enough so that with a touch of art she can make the deception complete, is willing to give herself to him for one year as the price of his activity in her schemes.

"She hates him, and she also fears him. I could see that, there in the house, when we talked about him. But all the same, as payment for his active cooperation in her affairs, she consents to give him herself for a time, and the sum of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars beside.

"I wonder if she really believes that he will be content with that? I wonder if she does not know that he will bleed her to the end of the chapter—to the end of his life, or hers?

"Or, does she rely upon that threat made by her in the letter, that if he does not live up to his agreement, he will be killed? If she does that, she is reckoning without her host, for whatever bad may be said of Carroll Burbank, there is no man who can say that he is afraid of anything, living or dead."

CHAPTER IX.

AN ESCAPE THROUGH THE DARK.

The detective had by this time determined in his own mind that it was the intention of the pseudo Miss Congdon to cross by the ferry of the Pennsylvania, or the Erie lines.

But in this he was mistaken, for while still half a block away from the ferry, the automobile drew up at the curb and stood there, as if awaiting the arrival of

somebody, for neither the woman nor her chauffeur offered to leave the car.

"Go ahead," he said hastily to his driver. "Turn up West Street. I will leave you as soon as you have made the turn. You can wait where you are, then, for further orders."

Then, as they made the turn, he discovered Patsy, who was leaning idly against a telegraph-post, as if he had not an object in the world.

The detective leaped from the car and hastened to join Patsy.

"Where are your man and woman?" he asked, at once.

"Inside the Erie ferry-house, waiting," was the reply. "I followed them inside and seated myself next to them long enough to hear them say that they were waiting for Madelaine, who was coming in an automobile. When I found that out, I pretended to go aboard one of the boats, but instead, I came out here."

Nick had drawn the assistant along with him while they were talking, and now they stood where they could see that "Madelaine" had made no move to leave her car.

Indeed, to look at her one might have supposed that she was asleep, so still did she keep in her seat.

But this was not to endure long.

As if there had been a preconcerted time set for the act, the two people whom Patsy had shadowed, came out of the ferry-house and crossed the street directly toward the motionless car.

"There they come," exclaimed Patsy suddenly, "and by the Lord Harry, the man has made a change."

"What sort of a change?" asked Nick.

"He has put on a mustache and goatee and a black wig since they entered the ferry-house. He was a red-headed individual with a smooth face when I saw him last."

The detective made no comment upon this.

The distance between them and the people they were watching was the whole width of the street, there were only the electric lights for illumination, and therefore, his view of the man and of the woman who accompanied him was not excellent.

"Shall we cross the street?" asked Patsy presently.

"No. Wait. Let us see what they intend to do."

"It looks to me as if it were their intention to enter the automobile and be taken——"

"I don't think so. Look. The woman is leaving it. She has seen them."

It was true.

The woman who called herself Madelaine Congdon descended hastily from the machine the moment she discovered her associates, and was already on the pavement beside it when they reached her.

Nick left Patsy then without a word, and dodging behind the shuttling cars, quickly crossed the street, and then made his way forward so that presently he was directly behind the trio who were now walking slowly along the pavement toward West Street.

It was to his great regret that he could not hear what they were saying, but the noises of the street were so strenuous that this was impossible.

However, he kept as close to them as he dared.

Once he could hear the man's voice quite plainly, and he was vaguely conscious that there was something familiar about it, although he forgot the idea as soon almost as it suggested itself.

And so the three crossed West Street, after going a block farther south—and there they approached a cab which seemed to be idle, or which was awaiting them.

The latter proved to be the fact, for they had barely reached it ere the door on the river side of it was thrown open and a woman descended to the street.

She joined the others without a word.

As soon as she left the cab, its driver started his horse away, but Nick turned quickly to Patsy and whispered:

"Get after that driver, Pat. Find out if he is the real thing. If he is, take his number and name and return here. If he is not, run him in and ask the captain at the station to hold him for me."

Patsy was gone like a shot, and Nick continued on after his quarry.

The four were now together.

There remained but one to be accounted for, and that was Carroll Burbank, who was doubtless awaiting them at the place of meeting.

The four moved along slowly, as if there were ample time to dispose of, and step by step made their way out to the end of one of the piers.

Just here it was difficult for the detective to follow without being observed, but he did take the opportunity to remove the gray wig and white mustache he had been wearing until that moment.

That done, he moved out slowly toward them along the pier.

But even as he started, he noticed that one of the women had disappeared.

Then, as he advanced, another went over the end of the pier, evidently into a boat that had been awaiting them.

Their backs were toward him and they seemed to have no fear, or no care whether they were observed or not, so now the detective moved swiftly forward.

But even as he did so, the man of the party leaped from the end of the pier, and instantly thereafter there came to the ears of the detective the chug-chug of a gasoline-engine, and Nick Carter realized that they had entered a launch and were already moving rapidly away over the surface of the river through the darkness.

It was a terribly disappointing thing to have happen at just that moment when success in the pursuit of them seemed so certain.

He paused at the end of the pier and gazed after them, for the night was not dark, and he could still see the launch quite plainly as it shot ahead, having turned its prow up the river so that it would be obliged to pass the ferry-slips of all the ferries.

And then an idea came to him.

"I wonder if it can be done?" he asked himself; and without waiting to reply to the question he turned and dashed away at a full run.

He reached the street and started northward, in the same general direction as that taken by the launch—but he had not made a dozen leaps before he almost ran into Patsy and the driver of the cab who had taken the woman Hawthorne to the place of meeting.

"I've got him!" cried Patsy. "I brought him back with me, and——"

But the cab driver had already raised the visor of his cap, and the act revealed—*Chick!*

"Come along with me!" exclaimed Nick. "They have taken to a launch, and gone up the river."

He would have dashed on again had not Chick seized him.

"Wait a moment, Nick," he said. "We have a launch here, also. Or, at least, we should have one here in a moment. But anyhow, I know where they are going, so we need not hurry so."

"Good boy!" said Nick, breathing easier. "How did you do it?"

"By a stroke of luck, no less, as Finnegan would say. I told Ten-Ichi to meet me at this very pier. Possibly he is here by this time."

They hurried together toward the end of the pier, but as Ten-Ichi had not yet appeared, they seated themselves to await him.

"How did you do it, Chick?" the detective asked again.

"By a stroke of luck such as would not happen again in a lifetime," was the reply.

"Tell me about it."

"When I left you I started directly for Brooklyn, taking the Subway for the Brooklyn Bridge in order to go directly to police headquarters over there."

"Yes."

"I happened to strike a train that was packed—an unusual thing at that hour—and the consequence was that I was obliged to hang on by a strap."

"Well?"

"There was a man and a woman directly behind me, also hanging on by their eyelids, and their position was such that I could plainly hear every word they uttered. Have you ever noticed, Nick, that in the roar of the Subway there will be here and there a voice which appears to harmonize with the noises so that you can hear it more plainly than any other?"

"Can't say that I have. But go on."

"Well, anyhow, I could hear what those two were saying, notwithstanding the fact that they seemed to use every effort to prevent their words reaching other ears."

"Get to the point, Chick."

"I was not attracted by their conversation until I heard the man make this remark:

"'I am worried about that infernal letter, Thornie. A lumbering Dutchman caromed against me and knocked both halves of it straight out of my hands. They were gone in an instant, and I saw one of them flutter through the network of steel toward the water.'

"You can imagine that I pricked up my ears at that; eh?"

"I should say so."

"Besides, there was the name, 'Thornie', which would answer very well for a shortening of Hawthorne."

"Get on with your story."

"'I wouldn't worry about it,' she said to him, in reply. 'Even if the letters were found, nobody could make head or tail to them.'

"'I am not sure about that,' he said. 'There were both halves, you know.'

"'But,' she said, 'it isn't at all likely that they would fall into the river anywhere near together. A person who found either half would throw it away as a lot of trash, and even if both halves did fall somewhere, side by side, there is not one person in a thousand who would think of putting them together, or who would know how to do it if they did happen to think about it.'

"I need not tell you, Nick, that I was satisfied by this time that the man was the same one who had lost our 'Message from the Clouds' in order that we might find it, and that the woman was the Hawthorne of the letter."

"Well?"

"And all this time it had struck me that there was something strangely familiar about the voice of the man."

"I was waiting for you to come to that," said the detective.

"Eh?"

"I was waiting for you to come to that part of it," he repeated.

"What in thunder do you know about it, Nick?"

"I know that the man was one whose voice we both know well—that he was Carroll Burbank."

"Well, I'll be blowed!"

"Why so?"

"How did you know that? He hasn't been here, for I happen to know that he is at this moment aboard a steam-yacht that he has chartered for this especial occasion, and that he is awaiting the arrival of——"

"Never mind my part of it. Tell me how you know that."

"I know it because I followed the two of them from the train. They did not cross the bridge, but went directly to South Ferry where they entered the ferry-house and seated themselves to complete their conversation. They sat on one of the benches directly under a window that opens upon the ferry-slip, and—well, I found a means of getting to the other side of that window without their knowledge.

"You see, Nick, the fact is those two had a lot to talk over which they did not care to have their confederates know about. It was the opportunity of a lifetime so far as I was concerned, and I took it."

"Hello: Here is Ten-Ichi with the launch. It is our turn, now," exclaimed the detective, at that instant.

CHAPTER X.

THE MURDERER'S YACHT.

"Hello!" exclaimed Nick, when the launch drew up at the end of the pier and they were in the act of boarding it. "This is the *Nadja's* launch. How in the world——"

"Finnegan told me over the phone that Joseph had returned to the house saying that the party did not care to go without you, and would wait till you were ready," explained Ten-Ichi. "I received the information just in time; just a little while after Chick told me that we would need a launch, so, of course—well, you know the rest."

"It seems that fate is assisting us all around in this case," mused the detective, aloud. "Do you know where you are going, Ten-Ichi?"

"Yes, chief. To a small steam-yacht called the *Sleeper*, moored off Fifty-fifth Street, or thereabouts. It is the one that Carroll Burbank has chartered."

"I wonder why the party thought it expedient to come all the way down here to take a launch which was to put them on board of a yacht moored away up there?" continued the detective.

"I can answer that," replied Chick. "The *Sleeper* was here, near Twenty-third Street when we came in with the *Nadja*. Burbank thought he didn't like you for a neighbor, and he decided to move. The arrangement had already been made for the launch to meet the party here, and so he told 'Thornie,' as he called her, to let the arrangement stand as it was and the launch could take them up the river just as well."

"I see."

There was silence for a moment, and then Nick called to Patsy, who was in the bow, steering.

"Patsy," he said, "reach into that locker on the port side, and pass me the dark-blue bathing-suit you will find there. I placed it there myself, and it should be there still."

"It is," replied Patsy; and he tossed it back to his chief.

At once the detective began to divest himself of his clothing.

"Going to take a swim?" asked Chick, grinning.

"Just that, boys."

There was not another word spoken until Nick Carter had donned the bathing-suit and resumed his seat. Then he said:

"Now, listen to me. Patsy, you will remain at the wheel. You will guide the launch in such a way that she will pass directly under the stern of the *Sleeper*."

"Aye, aye, chief."

"Just before we get there, I will let myself over the side of the launch into the water on the side farthest from the yacht. As you pass under the stern, I will let go my hold and swim to the rudder of the *Sleeper* while you will keep straight on. Boys, if you should be hailed from the yacht, give them the merry Ha-ha, as if you had had a drop too much. It is not likely that they will pay any further attention to you, or that it will occur to them that you have dropped a passenger."

"What are we to do after that?" asked Ten-Ichi.

"Keep on a little way, then come about and return as slowly and as silently as you can."

"And then——"

"See if you can manage so that you can drift under the stern without being seen or heard. I think you can do it if you make the right use of the tide that is running now."

"I can do it," replied Ten-Ichi confidently, "if Patsy will let me have the wheel. We won't use the engine at all."

"Patsy will do that. We all know what an expert boatman you are, Ten-Ichi."

The detective dived into another locker, and brought forth a belt which he strapped around his waist, and into this he thrust two of his revolvers which were loaded with waterproof cartridges, for now the *Sleeper* should be almost in sight.

"Shall I slow her down a little?" asked Ten-Ichi.

"No. Let her go ahead at full speed. Patsy, are you keeping a sharp lookout up there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you see anything of the yacht?"

"I see a yacht, and it is the only craft to be seen at anchor about here. That must be the *Sleeper*."

"Without a doubt," replied the detective.

Then, without an instant of hesitation he let himself into the water over the side that would be farthest from the yacht when they passed her, and he hung there in such a manner that only his hands could be seen where they grasped the gunwale.

All this time the launch was plunging onward and

rapidly approaching the yacht where lights gleamed from the cabin.

The launch came even closer, and somebody aboard the yacht appeared to have been startled by the throbbing of her engines, for suddenly a voice sung out to them through the darkness:

"Sheer off, there!" it said savagely. "What are you trying to do? Run us down?"

By way of reply, the man who hailed them heard only hoots and yells and derisive laughter.

Then, as they dashed almost directly under the overhang of the stern of the yacht, the launch suddenly shot ahead with redoubled speed, and those who remained aboard of her knew that the detective had released his hold and was now swimming under the surface of the water toward the rudder of the vessel they had just passed.

They could hear, too, the man on the deck of the yacht as he cursed them roundly for their carelessness; and they could see the outline of his figure as he walked back along the deck toward the waist of the vessel.

And then they disappeared through the darkness.

When the detective released his hold upon the gunwale of the launch, he permitted himself to sink into the water so that his body would not be seen from the deck of the yacht.

Then, having kept the general direction in mind, and also being able to distinguish the darker outlines of the hull of the yacht through the dark waters of the river, he swam rapidly under the water toward it.

He was but a moment in reaching the rudder which he seized; and here, as there was a considerable overhang to the stern of the craft, he was thoroughly screened from view.

He waited a considerable time after he, too, knew that the man who had delivered the hail had returned to the waist.

But when all was silent, and he was satisfied that the time had come to act, he began his climb to the deck.

Under ordinary conditions this would not have been a difficult task; it would not have been so now had it not been imperative that he should make no noise and should cause no motion of the craft which would attract the attention of those aboard of her.

But he did reach the deck without incurring any of these penalties, and at last found himself well aboard of the vessel.

It will be remembered that the day had been a hot one. The night was not much cooler, save that there was a slight breeze stirring over the river.

The consequence of the heat was that the cabin windows and doors were open, and that, therefore, almost as soon as the detective gained the deck, he could hear the sounds of voices proceeding from the cabin.

The thing that astonished him was the absence of a watch on the deck; but then he remembered with a smile, that the people who were aboard the yacht that night had certain business to perform which demanded that there should be no listeners.

"It is more than likely," he mused, "that Burbank has given the entire crew a night on shore in order that he and his party might be alone; and now that I think of it, that was Burbank's voice that hailed the launch. Humph! I must have the deck entirely to myself, but I think I will make sure of that premise before I act upon it."

And he did.

He made his way from the stern to the bow and back again without encountering a sign of a human presence more than that indicated by the voices from the cabin.

He looked into the forepeak; he peered into the galley; he examined the steward's quarters.

It was evident that the crew to a man had been sent ashore before the time of the meeting.

Satisfied as to this point, he returned slowly and cautiously along the deck until he was close to the skylight—which had been raised to admit the air—over the cabin where the discussion was going on.

The first words that he overheard were sufficiently significant.

Burbank was speaking, and the words the detective heard were these:

"I have told you that she is dead, and that is enough! You can take it or leave it. I am not going to be bullyragged by any such outfit as this one! Not on your lives!"

"But," said the voice of the woman, whom Nick had interviewed at half-past eight o'clock that very evening, "how do I know that?"

"You have my word for it, and that is enough," was the reply.

"It isn't enough."

"It is all you'll get."

"I won't have it so. You promised to show us the corpse. It was part of the agreement."

"Look here, Rose," said Burbank coldly, "do you suppose that I want to keep a corpse dangling around here in this kind of weather? It wouldn't be pleasant company."

"It was part of the agreement," she insisted, in a tone as unrelenting as his own.

"So was it a part of the agreement that the meeting was to be held here the night before last. I was ready for that meeting. I got *her* ready for you, too; but with a crew of seven men aboard this yacht, and with Elsie to be brought aboard this morning, could I keep the body of Madelaine here to await your pleasure, especially when the weather is as hot as it is now."

"What did you do with the body?" demanded a masculine voice which made Nick Carter start and then pass

his hand across his brow in perplexity. He remembered now that it was the voice that had attracted his attention on the street near the ferry.

"It is directly beneath you, Prax," replied Burbank dryly; "that is, it is so if the yacht has not swung around since I placed it there."

"Do you mean that it is at the bottom of the river?"

"That is what I mean—yes."

"Where some day it will float to the surface to be identified."

"If that body ever floats to the surface, Prax," rejoined Burbank coldly, "it will be so long a time hence that nobody will know whether it was once a woman or a dog. You can bet your life on that."

"I don't believe that you have put her out of the way at all," said the voice of the woman called Rose. "You are fooling us—fooling us all."

"I would, indeed, be a fool to do that. What would I gain by it? You people make me tired! If you are so infernally squeamish about your dirty work, why didn't you do it yourselves in the first place and leave me out of it? I wish you had! But I know the only reason why you didn't! It was because you didn't dare to do so. I'm no fool. What's the matter with you all, anyhow? Don't you get the lion's share? What do I get?"

"You get a hundred thousand dollars to-night—when you have proved that Madelaine Congdon is dead. Three weeks from now, you get what you have claimed was worth more to you than the entire fortune—*you get me!* But only when you prove your right to the fulfilment of the contract."

Nick heard the sound of a quick leap across the cabin, and then the sounds of footsteps, as if they were slowly retreating from some position. He also heard what he thought was a quickly suppressed scream.

Then the voice of Burbank, hoarse with passion, said slowly:

"I want you all to take warning here and now. Beware how far you try me. And you, Rose, *you* will fulfil your contract with me to the letter, or I will kill you and put your body beside the real Madelaine's. And you, Prax"—he laughed—"I know that you don't fear me, but neither do I fear you, and if you offer any more of your surly objections to things, I'll have it out with you right here. I'm in no mood for trifling. Hand over that hundred thousand and go ashore, all of you! And do it mighty quick, too!"

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT.

There was tense silence in the cabin after the conclusion of Carroll Burbank's defiance.

It seemed to Nick Carter, who was eavesdropping outside, as if the four people who had listened to him—three of whom it will be remembered, were women—were deliberately calculating upon his death, and were casting over in their minds just what the consequences would be if they should attack him.

And suddenly it came to the detective's mind that they had all along been considering this very event which was about to happen.

During that short space while the silence lasted, the detective went over again in his mind the contents of the strange letter blown to him from the Williamburg Bridge, and he realized now something that had escaped his attention before, which was that the plans of the conspirators had been materially changed from the original intention.

And he had no doubt that it was because of that change, or those changes, that the quarrel had arisen.

He recalled the statement made in the letter, "The murder of the elder sister must soon be discovered."

In the light of present conditions, as he saw them, there was no chance that the murder of the elder sister would ever have been discovered if those letters had not blown overboard, one-half falling into his hands and the other half eventually coming to him.

It was evident, therefore, that at the time of the hatching of the plot, the impersonation of Madelaine Congdon by the woman called Rose had not been considered, or, if it had been, Carroll Burbank had been kept in ignorance of it.

He realized that somewhere there was a plot within a plot.

He remembered, too, something that Chick had said to him back on the end of the pier while they were awaiting the arrival of Ten-Ichi with the launch; he recalled that Chick, in telling about the conversation he had overhead through an open window at the ferry-house, between Burbank and Thornie, had made the statement that those two had a good deal to talk over which they did not care to have the others know about.

And so in that moment, Nick Carter put two and two together, as was his habit.

He saw that the Praxatels, with the women Rose and Hawthorne, had plotted together for the undoing of Burbank when he should have performed their dirty work for them; and he saw that the woman Hawthorne had betrayed them to Burbank.

All this came upon him in a flash—during that interval which followed upon the speech made by Carroll Burbank.

It was Rose who finally replied to Burbank's angry remarks, and her voice was strangely unlike what it had been when she had spoken before.

Then it had been hard and cold and repellent, with a touch of scorn and contempt in every word she uttered; now it was soft and soothing, remonstrative and pleading

all at once, and the detective knew in that instant what a siren this woman could make of herself if she but chose to do so.

He did not wonder that when she chose to exert her influence over him, Burbank became a willing tool in her hands.

Plainly it had been the original intention that Rose should impersonate Madelaine; and also plainly, Burbank did not like the new plans as well as the old ones, whatever they may have been.

"Sit down, Carroll, and control that temper of yours," said Rose, in the matchless voice already described. "Do you think it behooves us now, to quarrel, and so to undo all that has been done?"

She received no reply to the question, and she continued:

"What is to become of me if we quarrel? Look at the position that I am in. I have already assumed the control and the prerogatives of Madelaine's fortune. Already I have installed an entire new set of servants in the house. Already I have been seen—at a distance, to be sure—by many who know Madelaine well. I have burned my bridges behind me, and now, with your ungovernable temper you would burn the bridges in front of me as well."

She paused again, and still there was no reply. Only a moody silence.

"You would make me the only victim of this affair if you do as you threaten to do. I would have to take the brunt of it all, and *you* would force that upon me—you who profess to love me—you who have until now been willing to sacrifice everything else in the world upon the condition that I would be your wife."

"A wife for a year! A divorce after that! What does that amount to?" demanded Burbank angrily.

"It is according to the agreement made between us. You are not going back on that, are you? You are a gambler. You have the reputation of 'making good.' Very well, make good now."

"I am making good all right. It is you and Prax who make the row; I do not. I have carried out my part of the bargain, up to date."

"Where is the body of Madelaine? You agreed to show that to us."

"It is at the bottom of the river. I have told you that already, and why it is there."

"We have reason to fear that you might deceive us about that. We know that in a way you were fond of her. You have told me more than once that the likeness between us sometimes almost made you fall in love with her."

Burbank laughed harshly.

"It is the likeness between a tiger-cat and the photograph, or the marble statue of one," he said. "I prefer the tiger-cat."

She preferred to ignore this.

"How are we to know that you have not spirited her away somewhere and concealed her, so that at any moment you might produce her and confound us all?" she resumed.

"You will have to take my word for that—unless you prefer to put on a diving-bell and search the bottom of the river," he replied.

"Very well, we will let that pass—for the present. Where is Elsie? It is evident that she is not here. You have given us to understand that she is, but we do not believe you."

"It seems to be your stunt not to believe anything that I say to-night," he said coldly.

"Answer my question, then. Where is Elsie?"

The detective, outside the cabin, could almost feel that Burbank shrugged his shoulders. And then the voice of Rose inquired again, and this time with some anger:

"Where is she?"

"I might make you any one of a dozen replies to that question, Rose," replied Burbank coolly. "I might tell you that she is beside her sister at the bottom of the river, for instance, only that it suits me to tell you the truth."

"Well, what is the truth about it?"

"This: She is safe and well, and in good care, where no harm of any kind will come to her."

"And what do you propose to do with her?"

"I propose to deliver her over to the tender mercies of Prax and Vera—or to you, if you prefer it so—just one hour after the ceremony which makes you my wife," was the cool reply.

"Oho!" exclaimed the voice of Praxatel. "That is the game, is it?"

"Yes; that's the game, Monsieur Ironarm, or Bras de Fer, as they call you in Paris," replied Burbank doggedly.

Nick Carter almost betrayed himself in the sudden start he gave at the sound of that name, for he knew at once why that voice had been vaguely familiar, for Bras de Fer—Ironarm—was the name of the most notorious crook in Paris, and once upon a time, long ago, the detective had been pitted against him.

But he had no time to recall those incidents now, for the conversation continued.

"Suppose that Rose should decline to carry out the agreement on the ground that you had not filled your part of the contract—what then?"

Burbank laughed again.

"I don't carry all my eggs in one basket, Prax," he said.

"You seem to be bunching them rather closely just now," was the cold reply; and a harsh laugh from Burbank followed the remark.

"Oh, you can put your gun away, Prax," he said carelessly. "You won't shoot, for you would only blow your own head off your shoulders if you should, and you know it as well as I do. I wasn't born yesterday. I knew perfectly well that if you got me off here on this yacht alone with you, that you would drop me to the bottom of the river before you went ashore, unless I happened to have a trump up my sleeve which would make you afraid to do it. That is better. Put the gun back in your pocket. You won't need it here, Prax."

"And the trump that you have up your sleeve, is Elsie, I suppose?" inquired the sneering voice of Praxatel.

"Exactly."

"And probably Madelaine as well. Perhaps you are saving her for another trump; eh?"

"Have it so if you wish. I am tired of arguing the question with you."

"It seems to me, Burbank, that we are to return ashore, no wiser than we were when we came here."

"That is precisely what I intended that you should do. What the devil do you want, anyhow? The earth? You fou have got the house, the securities, the bank-account, and everything that belonged to the sisters. I get only a hundred thousand of it—and Rose. When Rose is my wife, Elsie shall be delivered into your hands. When the year is up, you give me a quarter of a million, and I set Rose free. That is a clear statement of the whole matter. I have got you all where you can't squirm, and I mean to keep you there—for the present."

All the time during this conversation it had been a source of great regret to the detective that he could not see into the cabin as well as hear what was said there; and now, as Burbank ceased speaking, he heard Praxatel remark how insufferably warm it was, and express the wish at the same time that the skylights could be raised higher.

"You can pull that one up a bit if you like," suggested Burbank.

Then footsteps crossed the floor of the cabin, and an instant later, the skylight directly above Nick's head was lifted by the use of pulley-cords from within so that it left an opening at least three feet in width.

Instantly Nick Carter rose to his feet and stepped backward into the darkness, but into a position from which he could view the whole interior of the cabin.

What he saw there, was this:

An oblong table occupied the center of the cabin, and fastened to the floor around it were six swivel-chairs; one at either end, and two on each side.

At the far end of the table, facing the detective, the woman, Rose, was seated.

At her right hand one of the chairs had been swung around so that its back was toward the table; this was the chair which Praxatel had evidently just vacated in order to raise the skylight for more air.

At her left was one of the other women, whom Nick judged to be Vera, or Verona, as she has been named here.

At the end of the table, opposite Rose, Carroll Burbank was just in the act of lighting a cigar—was just applying a lighted match to the end of it, and on his left hand, half-facing the detective, was the one remaining member of the conspiracy—the woman "Thornie."

Just behind the chair occupied by Burbank stood Praxatel.

He had removed the wig, et cetera, that he had worn when Nick saw him on the street, and was now as Patsy had described him—smooth-faced and red-headed.

Tall, muscular, dominant, finely formed, resourceful, relentless, implacable at all times, as Nick Carter knew him to be from past experiences in the long ago, his attitude at the instant when Nick discovered him through the skylight, was startling to say the least.

He stood directly behind Burbank—almost over him.

His right arm was raised; was, in fact, in the very act of falling when the detective was permitted to look into the interior of the cabin.

That strong right arm, that bras de fer, or arm of iron—that terrible right hand of his held in its grasp a short, but terrible, weapon in the hands of a strong man—a loaded billy.

And just at the instant when the detective was permitted to view the scene, it descended with crushing force upon the head of Carroll Burbank.

As it fell, Thornie started to her feet with a scream; Vera looked on, unmoved, and Rose clapped her hands together and laughed aloud.

CHAPTER XII.

THE APPARITION IN THE DOORWAY.

It all happened in an interval during which one might have counted, one, two, three. It followed instantly upon the raising of the skylight which had permitted the detective to see into the cabin, and Nick understood now that the lifting of the skylight had been merely a ruse by which Praxatel had been enabled to pass behind his intended victim without the motive for the act being suspected.

And now Burbank was stretched, bleeding, upon the floor of the cabin, and Praxatel was standing over him with a cruel smile on his face and with a shrug in his massive shoulders which seemed to have become petrified there.

Thornie had sank back again upon her chair. She had nearly betrayed herself, and she realized it, perhaps.

"You have killed him!" she managed to articulate.

"Possibly. Possibly," was the reply from Praxatel.

"I hope you have not done unwisely," said a calm voice, from the opposite end of the table, which came from Vera.

"Bah!" said Praxatel in reply, spurning the quivering body with one foot, and then stepping over it as if were a log of wood. "Whether Burbank lied to us or not, whether he has killed Madelaine or only hidden her away, and no matter what he has done with Elsie, or what he has told her, we are better off and much safer with him dead than we would be with him alive. I have always intended to put him out of the way when we were through with him. And besides——"

He stopped, and the others waiting expectantly upon the words that were to follow.

"Besides," he continued, after a moment, "I don't think that Elsie is very far away from where we are now."

"Do you mean that she is aboard this yacht, notwithstanding what he said?" demanded Rose.

"Yes. That is what I mean. Where else would he hide her?"

"Then let us search for her! At once! At once!"

"Not so fast, Rose. There is plenty of time. I——"

Just here Nick heard no more, for he was startled almost into betraying his presence on the deck by feeling a light touch against his arm.

But the grasp tightened, and somehow, without turning his head, he knew that it was Chick.

Then, at the same instant, Chick's lips were pressed against his ear, and he felt rather than heard the assistant's words.

"I saw it all," breathed Chick. "We are all here, ready to act when you give the word."

Nick nodded, and again gave his attention to the interior of the cabin.

And now an event, that was entirely unexpected, happened.

A door at the end of the cabin was opened suddenly; the form of a woman appeared on the threshold, and the real Madelaine Congdon tottered into the room and stopped.

She stood there staring at the company, wide-eyed and terrified.

She was white to the lips: as white, almost, as chalk: her hair had fallen over her shoulders, and she held with trembling hands the loose folds of a negligee Princess gown in which she was clothed.

She looked as if she might be a spirit, a ghost—and for one awful instant the company upon which she had intruded evidently mistook her for one.

They all leaped to their feet with varied expressions and exclamations of alarm.

Even Praxatel himself uttered an oath and leaped backward from his chair, as if he, too, were frightened.

Rose shrieked and buried her face in her hands on the table; Thornie fell to the floor of the cabin in a swoon, and Vera alone seemed to retain her self-possession.

But even that extraordinary self-possession was checked by the next development of the drama or tragedy, for at that very instant when they were all here do combat, a second apparition appeared in the doorway, and the younger sister, Elsie, crossed the threshold and stood beside her sister.

"What—what does it all mean?" Madelaine gasped.

"Why are you all here? And who—*who are you?*" she demanded, pointing her trembling finger at Rose, who had raised her head from the table and was now staring, as white as Madelaine herself, at the sisters.

Praxatel recovered himself instantly, when he heard the sound of Madelaine's voice.

"Ho, ho, ho-ho-ho-ho!" he laughed. "You are dead, Madelaine. Didn't you know it? We were holding an inquest over your corpse. You are dead and at the bottom of the river—or, at least, you will be, mighty soon!"

He took a step toward her, and halted suddenly, for the younger sister leaped forward, pulled Madelaine back and took her place in front of her; and then she stood defiantly facing Praxatel with outstretched arm and with her index finger pointing at him straight between the eyes, as if it were a pistol instead of a dainty, almost transparent finger.

"I don't know who you are, but I *do* know who you are *not*," she cried out. "You are not our cousin Praxatel-Varney at all. You have imposed upon us. You are an impostor!"

"Ho, ho! Hear her!" laughed Praxatel. "What a little spitfire it is, to be sure! But you are quite right, little Elsie. I am not Praxatel-Varney. I killed him and threw his body into the Seine three years ago. I knew that neither you nor your sister knew him, and, therefore, it was easy to pass myself off as your cousin; eh?"

"What does it all mean?" gasped Madelaine again, staring about her, wild-eyed. "It is night, is it not? I—— Where am I? This is a yacht! This is the cabin of a yacht. I was in my own home. Carroll came to see me—he came to borrow some money. Only a little, he said, and—I remember now. I turned to leave the room to get it for him when he seized me and pressed some evil-smelling cloth over my face. When was that? Oh, when was it?"

"That, my dear, was three days ago," said the cool voice of Vera in reply.

"But why was it? *Why?* Why have I been brought here? Why does it happen, if that was three days ago, that I am dressed now exactly as I was then—in my morning wrapper? Why did Carroll drug me? Why did he take me away from my home? Why has he brought me here? Why has he kept me drugged all this time? *Why? Why?*"

"My dear," replied Vera coldly, and Madelaine shuddered, "there are some people in the world who would be better off out of it. You happen to be one of them, that is all."

"What do you mean? What *do* you mean? Have you brought me here to murder me? Have you brought Elsie here to murder her, too?"

"We want your fortune—yours and Elsie's, that is all," replied the cool tones of Vera. "Unfortunately, you could not very well transfer it to us while you lived, but it became easy that you should do so if you were dead. We thought you were dead, in fact."

"Thought—I—was—dead? I do not understand."

Her brain was still clouded with the effects of the drugs that had been administered by her cousin, and she did not yet comprehend their meaning.

For reply, Vera reached out and pointed toward the floor at the opposite end of the table.

"He agreed to put you out of the way," she said, indicating the apparently lifeless form of Carroll Burbank.

Madelaine stared at the figure on the floor, uttering no sound. Elsie did the same.

Both the young women seemed suddenly to realize the terrible situation in which they were involved.

Then the tableau came to an end.

Elsie uttered a shriek, and turning, fled from the cabin through the door by which she had entered.

Madelaine turned to follow her, but Praxatel leaped forward and seized her by the arm, and whirled her around so that she faced him.

Again he raised that terrible right arm of his, raised it as he had done over the head of Carroll Burbank, and the hand contained that terrible weapon with which he had stricken down the big, strong man as if he were an ox in a slaughter-house.

But the blow did not descend.

Just over their heads, a skylight was suddenly torn off and flung aside as if it had been so much paper.

A figure arrayed in a dark-blue bathing-suit leaped through the opening thus made and alighted squarely upon the shoulders of the so-called Herman Praxatel, bearing him to the floor of the cabin ere the blow he had intended to deliver could fall.

A second figure followed the first, and Chick alighted just in time to seize the descending arm of Vera, who would have buried a dagger in the heart of Nick Carter, where he struggled with her ex-convict husband.

At the same instant the companionway door was thrown

open, and Ten-Ichi rushed inside, followed closely by Patsy; and the former was just in time to seize upon the woman Rose when she would have sent a bullet crashing through the brain of the true Madelaine.

And all this happened in the twinkling of an eye; but not so quickly but that Praxatel had been able to half struggle to his feet notwithstanding the weight of the detective that was upon him, and in spite of the terrible pressure of Nick Carter's fingers, which were locked together around his throat.

But it was the last effort that Praxatel made.

That awful pressure was too much for him, and he succumbed, sinking to the deck in a heap, utterly unconscious.

* * * * * * *

The commissioner of police received, the next morning, the following letter:

"My Dear Sir: When you sent me that mysterious letter which so strangely fell into the hands of Sergeant Knapp, I already held the key to it. As you feared at the time, it was a serious affair; but the letter supplied the necessary clue to a conspiracy which would have ended in the murder of two innocent young women, the theft of a fortune, and the foisting upon New York society, in the guise of respectability, of a gang of the worst criminals I have ever been in contact with. I wish to state, sir, that I shall make it my duty and my pleasure to call upon you at your office this afternoon, and explain the entire matter to you.

"I may add that all the parties to the crime have been arrested, and that the prospective victims are none the worse for their adventures, save from the nervous shock. One of the criminals bears a name that is not unknown to you. He is Carroll Burbank; but just now he has a fractured skull, and the doctors at the hospital tell me that he cannot possibly recover. I am, my dear sir, yours most cordially, Nicholas Carter."

THE END.

The next issue, No. 500, will contain "Praxatel, of the Iron Arm; or, Nick Carter Follows an Ocean Trail."

ABOUT THE EARLY NUMBERS OF THE TIP TOP WEEKLY

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 200 are entirely out of print. We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays." We give herewith a complete list of all stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a free colored catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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189—Frank Merriwell Down South.
193—Frank Merriwell's Bravery.
197—Frank Merriwell's Hunting Tour.
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